Australian postal unions call off industrial action

Our reporters
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The Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU) staged limited one-day and half-day stoppages and protest rallies in different Australian states yesterday and on Tuesday in a bid to head off growing anger among postal workers.

At the rallies, union officials called off the campaign until after Christmas, despite the management's escalation of a long-running dispute over deteriorating pay and conditions. Australia Post has docked workers' pay for imposing partial work bans and then mobilised a strikebreaking force of casuals, contractors and volunteers to undermine this week's protests.

At stopwork rallies on Tuesday, CEPU leaders pushed through resolutions calling on union members to resume work on their next shift and "return postal services to normal" before Christmas as an "act of goodwill". Planned 24-hour strike action for yesterday in Victoria and Tasmania was called off and replaced with half-day stoppages.

While union officials claimed that the campaign would resume after Christmas, the CEPU has been working for months to prevent industrial action as it seeks to reach a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) with Australia Post.

Last week, the CEPU enforced directives by the Federal Court and the Rudd government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial tribunal to halt earlier planned stoppages and also end the picketing that had erupted at some mail centres in Victoria in response to the docking of pay (see: "Australia: Rudd government backs moves to outlaw national postal workers walkouts").

On December 18, "as a gesture of good faith," the union went further. It directed postal workers to stop industrial action and lift all work bans for four days, including earlier overtime and revenue checking bans designed to allow deliveries of unstamped mail.

These directives were accompanied by appeals for Australia Post management to resume negotiations last weekend. CEPU national president Ed Husic pleaded in a media release that the union had done everything it could to avoid strikes. "From the outset we sought to run a campaign that would minimise public disruption," he said.

Management not only ignored these pleas but also stepped up its recruitment of strikebreakers in preparation for this week's stoppages.

Postal workers, whose last EBA expired in December 2007, are demanding improved pay, better conditions and an end to the erosion of shift penalty rates. They want management to stop replacing full-time skilled workers with part-time and casual employees, halt the spread of contractors, and stop using company-appointed doctors to assess the health of injured workers and force them back to work.

On Tuesday, CEPU NSW state secretary Jim Metcher told a rally of about 800 postal workers in Surry Hills, Sydney that Australia Post had engaged in a series of provocations against union members, including threats to cut the pay of workers for even wearing union badges. But he pushed through the union's return to work resolution with no debate and simply called on union members to give "a big cheer" to indicate

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endorsement.

In Melbourne yesterday, Victorian CEPU branch secretary Joan Doyle told some 500 postal workers from across the city and country centres that the union's federal office had asked the state branch to "let the mail through for Christmas." She declared that action would resume next year, but proposed nothing specific.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) backed the CEPU's efforts to strike a deal with Australia Post by issuing a press release calling on management to act in "good faith". Australia Post's refusal to finalise an EBA with the union, the ACTU declared, was "not the way to build loyalty and respect from the union".

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd weighed in as well, effectively condemning the industrial action by declaring that Australian families had a "legitimate expectation" to get their Christmas mail.

The Rudd government this week announced the appointment of a high-profile banker, former Citigroup and National Australia Bank executive Ahmed Fahour, to head Australia Post. Fahour, who has a reputation for rationalising and cost-costing in large corporations, said he was confident of reaching an EBA deal with CEPU.

CEPU president Husic immediately welcomed the appointment, describing Fahour as "a respected business figure, astute and considered". Husic emphasised that the union was keen to work with Fahour to "help cement a productive, long-term working relationship".

CEPU and the ACTU are intent on enforcing the Rudd government's repressive Fair Work laws, which the FWA judges also used last week to bans strikes by Telstra telecommunications workers. The FWA full bench ruled that unions must give employers three days' notice of the specific details of any planned industrial action—so that employers can counteract the action.

The Telstra ruling was then applied to the postal workers—the latest in a series of FWA rulings against them. Earlier this year, the FWA three times denied postal workers even the right to vote for industrial action in a postal ballot, insisting that they had not engaged in "good faith bargaining" with Australia Post, as required by the government's laws.

One of the central planks of CEPU's EBA log of claims is for FWA arbitration of all disputes with Australia Post. In other words, postal workers are to be bound hand and foot to the very industrial tribunal that has repeatedly ruled against them.

The Labor government's industrial legislation goes far further than the previous conservative Coalition government's laws in preventing the working class from taking any action in defence of its basic rights and conditions. As the actions of the CEPU make clear, the unions function as the essential industrial policemen of this regime on behalf of employers and the government.

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